

STAR WEEKLY NOVEL

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GHOST WORLD

by JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

In this new venture,
Thane, the youngest
Crusader, saves the
day for all of them.



Illustration by Gerry Seiver

THERE were five people in the complicated control-room of the vast spaceship *Ultra*. Five people—with the fabulous Golden Amazon of Earth at their head, the blonde superwoman who, with her husband Abna, had set foot upon worlds incredible beyond imagination.

The Amazon and Abna were the leaders of the band of scientific rovers known as the Cosmic Crusaders, dedicating their lives and scientific talents to the uplifting of less fortunate people on other worlds. The other members of the Crusaders were just as important in a smaller way: Viona, the daughter of the Amazon and Abna; Mexone, her husband; and of late yet another member had been added, Thania, a fair-haired teenager with mischievous gray eyes who had something in common with Viona in her love for the bizarre.

Right now they stood at the huge outlook window watching something unusual in their experience of space and its manifestations. For, what had apparently been a nebula at first sight was now increasingly revealed as a face.

"It can't be," Viona said presently, speaking the thoughts of all of them. "A face just can't be there. Why—?" She turned in breathless amazement. "Think of the size of it! It must be millions of miles in area!"

The Amazon said nothing. She was staring fixedly through the window, her violet eyes puzzled. "I've been noticing something about it," Mexone said. "I doesn't move or alter expression. Therefore it probably isn't alive, but it's the queerest thing I've ever seen."

Again silence, save for the thin, hardly distinguishable whine from the power plant. The vast material nibbled on silently through space, travelling at many tens of thousands of miles an hour. Then at length the Amazon stirred.

"Just looking out of the window and trying to guess things isn't going to get us anywhere," she moved actively. "What we need is analysis."

She busied herself with the switchboard. In a moment or two she had depressed relevant switches and an Analyzer came into action, a device which projected a beam ahead of the *Ultra*'s line of flight and gave back an analysis in symbols and mathematics of whatever object it happened to strike; in this case the nebula shaped like a face.

"Well?" Abna asked, coming over to the instrument.

"Planes!" The Amazon pulled the wafer-thin foil from the output slot of the Analyzer and read it.

"X-rays in quantity," Abna said, looking over her shoulder. "And something else in high percentage—"

"The something else is platino-barium sulphide," the Amazon told him. "First time I've ever heard of a nebula being composed of barium sulphide."

"Perhaps it's," Abna started to say, but he was interrupted by an excited cry from Viona. She turned her coppery head from the window for a moment.

"Planes!" she exclaimed, jabbing a finger toward the glass. "Not far from the Face, either. They're just coming into view—or more correctly, we're just coming within sight of them."

The Amazon switched off the Analyzer, then with Abna at her head she moved back to the outlook port. There was no doubt that Viona was right. Five planets, mere pinhead specks, were now in view ahead at widely spaced distances, and they were so placed that their orbits formed an irregular circle around the mysteriously dominant face.

"That Face seems to overshadow the planets completely," Abna said, "particularly the third one away from us."

"That must be a remarkably cold system," the Amazon said. "There's no sun, to warm those worlds. In fact, it's the first dark system we've come across."

Mexone said: "There's something definitely weird somewhere. All planets have a certain light. They're not purely otherwise. So what makes these worlds so bright? Probably they're stars, after all."

"No, they're not stars," The Amazon shook her blonde head. "No; these are planets all right, but where they get their light from is a puzzle. Maybe we'd better study them more closely."

That she said led to the enormous telescope and swung it around on its universal bearings until the object glass was almost in contact with the outlook port. She peered through the binocular eyepiece, adjusting it carefully until the nearest planet in the system was vividly sharp before her. She stared intently, studying a wilderness of mountains, plains, and immensely deep gorges. No sign of life anywhere.

She adjusted the telescope's focal length and, one by one, examined the surfaces of the remaining four worlds toward which the *Ultra* was rushing. One of the planets, the one closest to the looming Face, had distinct signs of a deserted civilization upon it—buildings, roads, parks, all arranged with obviously man-made precision, but there was no sign of a living soul. On the other hand, the outermost planet of all had civilization and life as well. There were all the evidences of people coming and going. "Queer," the Amazon reflected, when appraisal by the others was also over. "There are five planets in the system. Three of them have apparently never been tenanted by living things. The fourth one has been populated, but is now deserted, while the fifth one has a civilization of sorts, about the same as our own back on Earth. And all these worlds shine of their own accord and have no sun."

"Correct," Abna confirmed. "And on top of all that we have the Face. So what's the answer?"

The Amazon considered for a moment, then: "Most of all, that Face interests me, and with the agreement of the rest of you I think we'll take a closer look at it. I suggest we cruise right into the Face and see if it's as solid as it seems to be."

Abna shrugged. "All right with me. What about you others?"

They nodded silent assent, at which the Amazon turned back to the switchboard and operated the power controls. The distant sunless system leaped sharply into new prominence and so, of course, did the enigmatic face.

"If you want my opinion," said Abna, "that face is a natural cosmic mistake—a bunch of radiations somehow coalesced together to form the outline of a face."

"There's more to it, dad, than natural formation," Viona said. "There's something mighty queer going on here and the sooner we find out what it is the better I'll be."

Quite abruptly she stopped talking, or more accurately her voice changed to a little gasp of pain as she put both hands to her face and tightly closed her eyes.

"What's the matter?" the Amazon demanded.

"I—I don't know. I felt just for a moment as though something were burning me." Viona caught her breath suddenly and stumbled away from the window. "There it is again!"

Thania said: "I—I think I can feel it, too. Not on my skin so much as in my eyes."

She closed them with her hands and staggered drunkenly away from the window. A few minutes later Mexone joined them. The only ones remaining at the window now were the Amazon and Abna, and even they could feel the strange sensation that had come upon the others.

"Radiations of some sort," Abna pronounced finally. "They come through this window because it isn't shielded from radiation as the walls are."

"Well, you find out what it is," the Amazon said, and hurried away to the control board. On the analyzing screen at the control board the answer was plain enough.

"X-rays!" Abna exclaimed. "No wonder we felt burned."

"Where are they coming from?" Viona demanded. "The Face?"

"No. There was a puzzled look on the

Amazon's features. "Most of them are coming from somewhere out in space."

Risking the burning effect produced near the window, she advanced to it and looked outside.

"There!" she exclaimed, pointing as Abna joined her. "That's where they're emanating from—that planet!"

Abna jumped over to the switchboard—and altered the *Ultra*'s course, sending the great vessel speeding away majestically from the leering visage in the void.

"All very interesting," the Amazon said thoughtfully. "That planet from which the x-rays are emanating is the one planet in this system which shows signs of a civilization. Yet why the inhabitants should want to create, or perpetuate, a face in infinity is a puzzle indeed."

"Perhaps," Thania hesitated, "it's some kind of god they've created."

"A good suggestion," the Amazon admitted, "but somehow I don't think it's the right one. No—that's no god. It's something much more subtle we've stumbled into. Consider the facts—the nebulaic face is composed mainly of platino-barium sulphide crystals, and we have a tremendous amount of x-rays. It's an acknowledged scientific fact that x-rays excite barium sulphide."

"You're right, Vion!" Abna interrupted, snapping his fingers. "Given a field of barium sulphide crystals, all we had here, and the x-rays, and the field of crystals will become luminous."

The Amazon turned again to the Analyzer and switched it on.

"I just wanted to make sure," she said, switching the instrument off, "on one particular point, and I've done it. You'll be interested to know that although the x-rays are the main feature, there are also a dozen other radiations coming from that apparently deserted planet—down there."

"Meaning what?" Thania questioned.

"Meaning, my dear, that there are evidently a dozen other radiations at work as 'modellers.' Radiations which are supplying their whole small contribution to the mass of x-rays, radiations which are forming eyes, nose, mouth, and little characteristics while the x-rays take on the major bulk of the job."

The Amazon gave a grim smile. "That Face could easily be the uninitiated, but we happen to be intelligent enough to grasp the know-how. And I'll wager that the scientists responsible are not using their talents just to prove they're artistic. They're up to something, and probably it wouldn't do any harm if we tried to find out what something it is."

"Of course," Mexone agreed promptly. "After all, that's what we're always doing, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—" the Amazon sighed. "We have to guard against being interfering. Mexone. Our job is not to barge in on unsuspecting civilizations and demand to know what they're up to."

"That's true enough," Abna interrupted, "but it still doesn't stop us investigating. We can always move on quietly and find out so reason to suspect anything unusual or dangerous."

The Amazon smiled faintly. "I was rather hoping you'd say that. Any suggestions as to where we should begin investigating?"

It was Abna who made the decision. "I would suggest the planet that has the remains of civilization upon it."

"Why?" the Amazon questioned in surprise. "We're not going to get much out of a deserted world, are we?"

"That depends." Abna was looking thoughtful. "Sometimes the remains can show us quite a great deal, especially with the kind of instruments we carry. On the other hand, if we go to the civilized planet, we lay ourselves open to very pointed questions from the inhabitants."

"I think dad's right!" Viona exclaimed.

The Amazon said nothing, but her violet eyes glanced at the others quickly and held each one silently in sympathy with Viona's, so without any more hesitation she turned to the switchboard and altered the *Ultra*'s course, sending the *Ultra* around in a wide semi-circle finally turning her nose toward the planet nearest the void.

"It's manifestly impossible," Abna said, "for a system of planets like this to exist without a primary, or sun. They couldn't form orbits without a master gravitation to chain them."

"Yet there's no sign of a sun," the Amazon said. Abna frowned. "The sun of this system could have become a dark star—somehow, and would still be the centre of gravity."

"The Amazon turned to the control panel and switched on an instrument. After a while she switched off and turned to Abna.

"Your guess is right. There is a dark body on the far edge of this system: This radar apparatus shows it clearly."

The planet ahead had now become wide enough to swallow up the stars. Again the Amazon turned to the control board, cut down the power, and levelled the Ultra out so that the huge vessel was flying horizontally to the disordered-looking landscape below. Lower, and lower still, losing velocity with every second, until at last the Ultra came to rest amidst a cloud of dust.

"Now," the Amazon said, "let's see what sort of planet we've got."

She switched on the exterior analyzers and contemplated them.

"One hundred and forty degrees Fahrenheit!" Abna exclaimed over her shoulder.

"Volcanic warmth, I imagine," the Amazon answered. "But since there's a pretty low humidity reading, the conditions shouldn't prove beyond endurance."

"Oxygen 70 per cent," Thania added. "That's a breathable atmosphere, isn't it?"

"Good enough," the Amazon answered briefly.

"All we need are weapons and provisions."

One by one, each of them turned and from lockers in the wall took prepared kits of tools, instruments and provisions. Then, the Amazon in the forefront, they stepped through the great airlock and jumped down to the surface of this new and peculiar world which was covered with a chalk-like dust.

Somehow, everything looked unreal and photographic—the white icing-sugar buildings standing silently around them, and the enormous Face leering down at them from the sky.

"Reminds me of a graveyard," Viona said at last.

"Probably because it is one," Thania commented. "And that horrible Face! I—I just feel as though I want to run—and run—and run! Anywhere!"

She half-turned as she spoke and glanced back toward the reassuring bulk of the Ultra. Then abruptly, the picture of the others could grasp her intentions, she broke away from them and went speeding away through the chalky soil.

"What's the matter with her?" the Amazon demanded, her face taut.

"There's something about this place—something devilish . . ." Viona said, and it was obvious she was having a struggle to control herself. "I'll go and fetch her."

"You mean we all will," the Amazon said. "Come on."

She started on a swift run in pursuit of the fleeing Thania, and the others coming up quickly behind her. Thania had no more fear of the unlike speed of the Amazon, who soon caught up with the obviously panicked girl and dragged her to a halt.

"Let me go!" Thania shouted, wriggling in the Amazon's fierce clutch.

"Remind me later," the Amazon's right fist came around and hit her a resonating blow on the side of the jaw. She sagged weakly, then collapsed in the flaky dust.

"What did you do that for?" Abna demanded.

"For obvious reasons," the Amazon replied. "Something's frightened her so badly that she's on the verge of hysteria, and there's only one way to cure that. And I've done it."

At a moment's hesitation, Viona went down on her knees and gathered the limp girl's head and shoulders in her arms. She looked up at her mother.

"I'm not questioning but what you did the right thing . . ." she began to say, then hesitated as the Amazon cut her short.

"Thanks for your tolerance, Viona! Anything else you want to say?"

"As a matter of fact there is," Viona lifted the unconscious girl to her feet and supported her. "You ought to remember that a blow from your fist is strong enough to break the neck of a prize ox."

"Thania isn't so fragile," the Amazon said coldly. "She's had enough surgery performed on her to make her as strong as we are, so I'll wager I didn't hurt her. We can soon find out."

With that the Amazon motioned for Viona to stand aside, and she herself took the weight of the unconscious girl. She shook her fiercely, gave her little slaps in the face, and at last she began to blink into consciousness again.

"Better?" the Amazon asked briefly, and Thania nodded slowly.

"Yes—I'm better. Thanks." She gave her head a shake. "Only—"

"Only what?"

"That feeling's coming on again, somewhere inside me. A kind of mad panic. I'm terrified of you and I don't know what it is. Can you understand it?"

"No." The Amazon's face was unconcernedly set. "Well, I can," Viona said quietly. "There's something devilish about this place. I can feel it—and so can Thania, evidently."

"Rubbish!" the Amazon said flatly.

"I don't think it is," Viona went on. "It's affecting you too, but not in a panic way. It's making you hard and curt instead. You're not your usual self."

"You're right there," Abna agreed anxiously. "A moment it looks as though the Amazon was going to fly into heated rage, then evidently she got control of herself just in time."

"Yes—perhaps I have," she admitted with a frown. "I just feel that way—so much so I even began to think Thania I don't know why I did it."

Viona said: "You did it, mother, for the same reason that Thania bolted blindly away in an effort to escape or something like isn't really there. There's something odd about this planet—something that terrifies or unbalances the reason."

There was silence for a moment as, grim-faced, the five looked about them.

"Perhaps," Abna said at last, staring upwards, "it has something to do with that Face."

"Thania's right," Thania said suddenly, her voice taut and her gray eyes full of strain. "Something's

Followers of the Golden Amazon and the Cosmic Crusader's adventures, who have been led to believe that the author died suddenly in September, Mr. Fearn

novels and the Verge Science fiction series, about the super-woman born during the London Blitz, was credited originally for The Star Weekly

wrong with this world, something that's driven away its population. I can't stand any more of it! Let's get back to the Ultra."

"No," the Amazon shook her head. "No, we're not going to do that because that's probably the very thing they're expected to do. I've not the least doubt that we're being watched—though don't ask me from where. We won't discover anything by running away. We'll stick it, as we've always done."

"You're the boss," Abna shrugged. "But how long do you think we'll be able to hold out against this sinister influence working against us?"

"We'll stick it as well as we can," the Amazon gestured a trifle impatiently. "After all, there's so much to find out here. Why should people escape from this world and maintain a scurrying face and terror whenever they see only one people in this whole system? For apparently there are. All the other worlds are deserted. That face peering down from up there is being maintained for a reason, and I have the feeling that the people of this world are still here . . . somewhere."

There was silence for a moment; then apparently struck by a thought, the Amazon pulled an instrument from her belt and focussed it up carefully. When was to her liking, she projected the electronic beam down toward the sound and read the reactionary needle on the dial.

"That explains why everything's so light," she said, indicating it. "There's a very high proportion of radioactive mineral in this planet."

She began moving through the ashy dust, picking her way over boulders and collapsed girders, looking about as she went. The others followed.

As they advanced they fought continually against the terror-waves. To the Amazon and Abna, with their high balance and resistant nerves, it was not so much a struggle as a flat, uncompromising refusal to be broken down by anything alien to their own desires.

"I'm a while Abna called a halt. "Better not go too far," he cautioned. "We don't want to get out of touch with the Ultra."

They looked back towards it but could not see

it. The place where it had been was nothing but an amphitheatre of gray dust.

"Where's—where's it gone?" Viona asked uncertainly.

For answer the grim-faced Abna pulled an instrument out of his belt and snapped on the activating button. He spoke as he worked. "To the eye the Ultra completely vanishes!" He broke off suddenly, with obvious relief. "It's still there. There's a distinct reaction from the Ultra's magnetic power. Look at the needle here."

The others looked at the undeniable evidence.

"The Ultra is covered in dust," the Amazon explained, "and therefore looks like one of the many small hills scattered about this region." Her hand pointed to a hill that she saw.

The others gazed at one distant hill in particular, its base marked by what appeared to be a cave.

Then the Amazon spoke again. "The hole at the bottom isn't a cave. It's the airlock. Naturally the magnetism of the ship has drawn the metallic dust to itself and given an overcoat."

The Amazon would probably have said more, but Thania clapped both hands to her head and gave a piercing scream. Then without explaining herself she dashed away at a stumbling run.

Viona followed in pursuit, but before she had gone a dozen yards there was a wild, panic-stricken cry. The Ultra seemed to be suddenly disappearing into the ground. The others blinked, and Viona in particular. Then she was on her way again, stumbling over the broken stones and girders until she came to a jagged hole in the ground not six yards away. When she found that the ground was no longer firm, she got down on her knees and gently crawled to the edge of the hole to have a look.

She could not quite believe what she saw. She was looking down at a city. Or was it a city? All she could make out were thousands of luminous dots—completely immovable—just like the lights of a city at night.

"Thania!" she called at last. "Thania, are you there?"

"Here!" came the faint response. "I'm on a sort of ledge."

Viona reached back with difficulty into her belt and tugged out a high-power atomizer, which she shone into the space below. At almost immediately she saw Thania, lying sprawled face upwards on a jutting finger of rock.

"Use your own torch to show your position," Viona instructed. "Then I'll come and get you."

"I—can't," Abna burst out. "My torch's burnt."

"Hang on," Viona called, switching off. "I'll be with you in a moment."

She glanced up as, with delicate steps, the Amazon, Abna and Mexone reached her side. As quickly as she could, Viona explained the position.

"I'd better go," Abna said, uncoiling a length of tough nylon rope from his belt.

He gave the rope to the Amazon, and she tied it around her slim waist, the brand herself for the strain. Abna lowered himself into the hole, eased himself down, then let himself go.

All he could see at first were mineral-veined rocks, some of them glowing with odd phosphorescent light. He saw the right of the jagged ledge on which Thania was sprawled. He released the rope suddenly and plunged the last few feet to hard rock. In a matter of moments he was at her side.

"My back," Thania whispered. "I—I can't move it or bend it."

Just like steel. Abna murmured as he took her in his arms. "Maybe a little metaphysical process can put things right."

Thania had never before experienced the metaphysical power of Abna—a power which he alone of the party possessed—and now that she did admit to feel it, it was a wonder and a blessing. Thania. As a moment of silence continued, as Abna held her with a gentle but rigid tightness, she felt the grinding pain and stiffness ease from her body. Finally she opened her eyes.

"Better," Abna asked gently.

"It's more than that. It's gone altogether. . . . Oh, Abna, what a wonderful man you are!"

"I'm not a wonderful man, really, you know. I'm a hard-boiled, heartless, seventh-foot tall adventurer from Jupiter. What powers I have are natural gifts, so there's nothing really wonderful about them. . . . Now—"

His powerful hands gripped her. "Let's see how you can stand up."

In a moment Thania was on her feet.

"As good as new!" she exclaimed.

Suddenly there was a blaze of light from above,

accompanied by the voice of the Amazon. "What's going on down there? Is everything all right, Abna?"

"Everything's just fine," he replied. "Thania's just—He broke off abruptly and turned as Thania clutched tightly at his arm. He sensed the urgency in her eyes, and in the moment he considered why. Somebody, or something, was approaching up an acclivity in the distance.

"People of some sort," Thania whispered. "We're right in their path, too. What do we do?"

Abna called sharply above "Put out your light, Vi. There's some kind of life down here. I'll contact you later."

The torchlights expired. Abna and Thania stood close together, watching the distant rocky slope along which lights were moving—lights which were presumably carried by people.

The two Crusaders moved quickly and silently behind a tall rock spur. Presently a file of about 20 men and women; scantily clad, and looking exactly like Earth people in appearance, each one bearing an electric light on their heads fitted to some kind of corset fixture, came into view on the ledge from the acclivity.

They looked neither to right nor to left. As they came nearer, Abna and Thania could see they were each carrying two pieces of rock, one on each shoulder.

"They move as though they're sleep-walking or something," Abna murmured.

"Like zombies," the girl muttered.

Each of them had a dead-pan, expressionless face with eyes staring straight in front. When the last one had gone by, Abna scrambled to his feet.

"I'm following them to see where they go," he said. "You get back up above to safety. The rope's still hanging."

He slipped away into the gloom in pursuit of the bobbing lights. Thania turned and saw something—a round, red, glowing thing, like a rock load, a lamp blazing brightly on his head.

Sheer panic gripped her as he came steadily on. In a matter of moments he was upon her and, finding her blocking his path, he set down the two rocks he was carrying. Without speaking he gripped her around the waist and threw her away from him. Helplessly she collapsed amidst dust and rock shavings. Then she suddenly remembered the protonic gun in her belt.

But before she could level the weapon, the zombie dove upon her and, snatching the gun from her hand, twisted her arm backwards and upwards. Thania screamed with the pain of it, but the creature held on with relentless clutch, his other hand seeking for her throat. Suddenly he found it and gripped with a clutch of steel.

Thania squirmed helplessly. She felt herself growing weaker as, through a blur, she saw a figure apparently drop from the skies.

"Amazon—" Thania managed to creak. Then her senses gave out just as the zombie was torn from her by the Amazon's steel-strong hand.

The zombie turned at the new sound, and simultaneously a fist slammed straight into his face with shattering power. It was a blow which would have nearly killed an ordinary being, but in this instance it hardly had any effect, and the Amazon was still grinding her teeth at the pale man's fingers.

But in trying to defend himself, the zombie exposed himself to the Amazon's favorite killing blow. As her fist crashed into his neck, he collapsed to the dusty floor with his nerve centres paralysed.

The Amazon turned to the slowly recovering Thania and hauled her to her feet.

"Where's Abna?" she asked the girl.

"He's following a crowd of these zombies somewhere."

They glanced up as there were sounds of movement above. Mexone and then Viona came sliding down the nylon rope into the underworld.

"What's going on?" Mexone asked, and at that the Amazon indicated the zombie stretched in the dust. She told them about the attack on Thania.

"It's dead," Viona said. "I saw it with my own her head. 'Anything but, I imagine. These people are the toughest I've ever encountered. I would have killed him straight off with my gun, but I wouldn't have kept him for the purpose of learning what kind of a set-up really operates on this world."

She broke off as a sound caught her attention in the distant gloom. Then the giant figure of Abna came into view. They brought him up to date on

events, and then asked him where the zombies had gone.

"To the surface, and that's about all I can tell you. They went to a kind of natural ramp that leads up out of the underworld, but after that . . . Well, I just don't know." Abna sighed and rubbed the back of his head in perplexity. Each man and woman put down his or her donation of rock in a neat cairn, and then dashed for the safety of the underworld as though demons were after them. I don't grasp the point at all—the left-hand shoulder rocks in one place and the right-hand shoulder rocks in another. Just left there! It doesn't make sense."

"Since you saw the people dash back into the underworld," the Amazon remarked, "we'll be seeing them here again soon, won't we?"

"As a matter of fact, no." Abna shook his head. "Once they came back into the underworld they went down a declivity and that was the last I saw of them. It seems evident that they have one way to come and another to go. Where are the rocks this fellow was carrying?"

The Amazon pointed them out to him, but Abna found nothing significant about them. He finally tossed them away in disgust, and in that moment astounding things happened.

The instant the rocks struck the ground—one on top of the other as it happened—there was a flash of intensely blue, unbearable light, followed instantly by a bang so loud, so violent, so explosive that it was of all proportion to the size of the rocks.

The Crusaders were instantly thrown down. Gradually the violent disturbance ceased and a fine fog of white dust settled over everything.

"What in cosmos was that?" the Amazon demanded as she got to her feet. "It went off like a nuclear bomb!"

Puzzled, their heads still singing, they all moved to the spot where the rocks had been thrown. It lay just over a dip in the rimrock, on the acclivity itself, but the surprising thing was that the upward slope in the rocks had vanished. Instead there was an enormous, gaping hole from which sulphuric-smelling smoke was discharging.

Finally the Amazon said: "Either the rocks somehow detonated volcanic gas by friction on impact—or—"

"Or Abna finished for her," the two rocks struck against each other as I threw them, and produced the explosion."

"But how could that happen?" Viona demanded. Abna smiled grimly. "It's possible, if the constitution of the rocks is so that they can bring out heat. Remember they're mainly radioactive and not normal rock. Yes," Abna went on, thinking, "I believe it's the answer. It explains why the zombies are at such pains to keep the rocks separate. From each other, why they place them in two distinct piles once they reach the surface."

"It solves one point and makes another," the Amazon commented. "It deepens the mystery as to why. What kind of fantastic beings are these that they'll risk instant death stumbling up a rubbly slope with a deadly rock on each shoulder? Why, one slip might bring the rocks together and blow them to eternity—" The Amazon stopped abruptly as she detected a movement nearby.

"The zombie I knocked out!" she exclaimed.

"He's rearing." She darted forward and dragged the still dazed man from the debris. He stood up and just looked, making no effort this time to show fight.

"I want to talk to you," the Amazon said grimly, facing him. "Can you understand me?"

"I have no response," the dull eyes in the dead-pan face just gazed fixedly in front.

"We'll take him back to the Ultra and find out with our apparatus what's the matter with him," Abna said.

CHAPTER II

BACK in the Ultra, the Amazon switched on one of the machines and a pale yellow beam enveloped the zombie from head to foot. On the machine's dial a needle flickered over a variety of symbols which, in their entirety, gave an analysis. The Amazon wrote down the various findings, and then handed her sheet of calculations to Abna.

"From this," he said to the others, "it would seem that our friend is fully and completely alive, despite his queer appearance. He also has all his

own individuality, but it is swamped by a greater power taking control—which is something I can well believe.

He was silent for a moment, reading further, then: "That's why he's so tough! Every cell of his body has been hardened to three times normal." He put the paper down. "Well, what do you suggest we do now?"

"The only thing," the Amazon responded. "Try to learn something from him."

"How?" Viona questioned. "His mind's obviously dominated by something else. How do you propose breaking through the barrier?"

"With one of our thought amplifiers," the Amazon said, pulling the instrument in question forward on its rubber wheels. "It's possible that ordinary thought waves won't penetrate the fog around this creature's brain, but when they're amplified there might be success."

"If I use the Language Translator," Viona said quickly, switching it on. Then if our deadpan friend is moved to speak in his own language, the translation can be used for us."

So a task was begun which, at its occupied all of two hours. During that time the mental resistance of the zombie was broken down, and he decided to talk, in a shrill and incomprehensible language. Immediately the electronic translator took up the task of translation and transmitted a normal but mechanical voice through its speaker.

"I am a native of this planet, Amazon of Earth, and while this mental freedom lasts I will try to answer your questions, even though I do not know who you are. I have no name—only a number, and that in your mathematics I would place as 46."

"What's your name?" the Amazon demanded. "Is that why you have no name and only a number?"

"That is why. I, and thousands like me, were born into slavery and have been dominated ever since. It is the Face—the Face in the Heavens. That has made us slaves."

"What is the purpose of this slavery? What are you doing?" the Amazon questioned.

"We have not been told that. For generations this domination has gone on. Our ancestors fought against it, but were beaten. They had to obey the commands given them, even though to escape the punishment given for disobedience they had to enter the underworld of this planet, leaving their civilization—which has since crumbled into ruins. . . . But even in the underworld we were not safe. The commands reached us even there and gradually, we have succumbed to them so that now we do nothing but obey. We are slaves, and we are slaves to the Face. The mineral substances in shifts, day and night. The two minerals are never to be in contact with each other, and are to be carried endlessly to the surface world and left at a certain place. They are to be carried always by a slave and not entrusted to any mechanical system capable of causing any jarring."

"And when these minerals have been taken to the surface and left there, what happens?" the Amazon demanded.

"We don't know. Few of us do; but there are rumors of beings who come and take the mineral loads away. I have never seen it done. The Face is too terrifying to endure when we are on the surface."

The Amazon reflected, then said: "A little while ago you attacked and nearly killed this girl here." She nodded to Thania. "Why?"

"I merely follow orders, namely to destroy anybody or anything which hinders our journey to the surface, when we are carrying a load. Then we are released."

Quite suddenly the Amazon stopped talking, of course, the translator stopped, too. He made a queer, strangled noise in his throat, seemed to shudder for a moment, and then his head dropped wearily to his chest. The Amazon felt his pulse, and then turned to the others.

"Dead," she announced.

Abna said grimly: "For all we know, the powers back of all this jiggery pokery may have a system by which they can hear what the slaves are up to. They could have heard 46's revelations and wiped him out before he told us anything."

"Which means," the Amazon answered, "that the Ultra's not so proof against radiations and waves as we imagined." She was about to continue, but hesitated and raised a hand for silence. Almost immediately the other became aware of what had been so common to her ultra life—there came a thin whining sound from somewhere outside, growing ever louder. They dashed to the airlock and peered outside.

Something was sweeping down from the upper heights of the sky—a huge "S" of fire.

"Spaceships!" Viona ejaculated.

"They can't be seen," the Amazon replied. "The Ultra's hidden, too, thanks to this dust being everywhere. I suggest we go outside, keep ourselves hidden by the city ruins, and watch what happens."

As quickly as possible the five Crusaders hurried toward the nearest mass of twisted metal and masonry. Once under cover they watched ship after ship come sweeping down. When they had landed there were about a dozen all in all.

Presently a group emerged from the ships. The tuniced beings moved with a certain air of military precision.

They marched promptly to the huge Cairns of rock which had been placed in position by the zombies. Then, with a tremendous and exaggerated caution, they each shouldered a piece of rock and carried it back to one of the spaceships.

This continued for a while, and then the men suddenly stopped their work and headed at a run straight for the ruins where the Crusaders were hiding.

Gun in hand, the Amazon leaped from her hiding place to meet the rush of men like war. For the other Crusaders following, she fired ruthlessly at the advancing file.

In all directions, men fell and vanished, but the remainder still came on, and in the end the Crusaders found themselves in the dust, chains clamped around their wrists and ankles.

A commanding officer approached the prisoners. He was a tall man, with an air of haughty intolerance. So familiar was he to an Earthman in physique, it was difficult to realize that he was the denizen of a far-flung world in the First Galaxy.

A short, vicious-tailed whip lay in one of his six-fingered hands. He beat it gently in the palm of his other hand, and smiled.

"I had expected something more subtle from the Cosmic Crusaders," he commented in English. "That was very crude, besides being costly to my men. It also placed all of you in considerable danger but, as you must have noticed, we did not attempt to kill any of you."

The Amazon stared malevolently, her purple eyes glinting.

"And now," the commander said, smiling again, "you wonder why I am and why I speak your own tongue so fluently. My name is Agos Thar, and I'm the military commander of my planet and also the adviser to its scientific government. As to your language . . . Well, since you arrived on this planet you have talked a lot."

"What's that got to do with it?" the Amazon snapped.

"I'll tell you. We—that is, the people of my planet—are all blessed with photographic brains. Whatever we hear or see we never forget. For us to hear only a few words of your language is sufficient for us to know the whole."

"So you say you've been hearing our voices," Abna said.

"Exactly. Quite naturally, you're wondering what is happening on this planet—why the people are slaves and carry rocks. Since, as I think, you know already that contact of two of the rocks produces devastating energy, I can tell you the rest of it. It won't do you any good even when you know our purpose. . . ."

He slapped the butt of his whip in his palm and then continued. "We have in mind nothing less than the rekindling of our sun, which through a cosmic shock was reduced to a dead star many centuries ago. Once that sun is rekindled, our system can again live to the full in overhead light and warmth, and will not have to rely on radioactive and volcanic power to be able to sustain its existence."

"We have already detected a dead star near this system," the Amazon said. "That, I suppose, is your one-time sun?"

"That is correct. But, since you yourselves are scientists, consider the intricacies involved. First, the rocks of this world have to be transported to the dead star, a process which has already been going on for many years. Secondly, when they have been transported, there remains the very dangerous and exacting task of bringing two rocks of the opposing values into contact in close proximity to the remainder of the rocks. That will be done by machines, of course, but in control of the machines there must be intelligent beings whom we can implicitly trust. Once the moment of rock contact

is gained there will be no stopping back. The instant fusion of a sun's core will take place, and in that inconceivable fury of atomic energies, those who have started the celestial holocaust must surely perish. Therefore they must be quick to escape."

Agos Thar paused and glowered down on the five adventurers sprawled around him. "Do I make myself clear, my friends?"

"Entirely," the Amazon answered grimly. "You are thinking of the five of us here, are you just the people for the task you have in mind?"

"Precisely . . ." Agos Thar spread his hands and was smiling again.

"And if we had not chanced to come here, what would have happened to the five of us here?"

"In that event, slaves from this world would have been used, but since every slave on this planet is useful, whereas you five are unwelcome visitors, it is obvious to me that in dying you should prove yourself useful."

"And you think we'll obey your orders?" Viona demanded.

Thar said coldly: "I'm sure you will. In fact, you won't be in any fit state to do otherwise by the time you have been fitted with our instruments have noticed, since arriving here, the atmosphere of intense compulsion which pervades this place? An atmosphere which saps the individual will and makes it amenable to the orders of another?"

"Yes, we've noticed," the Amazon confirmed. "Presumably waves of radiation from your planet designed for the special purpose of dominating the people of this world."

"Yes, that is the situation," Thar agreed.

"The only impediment in our plan has been the arrival of yourselves, but as I have said, you shall turn that impediment to good account even as you destroy yourselves."

Abna said curtly: "Don't be too sure of yourself, my friend. Our scientific knowledge is easily level, and probably in advance of yours. I shall turn that impediment to good account even as you destroy yourselves."

"I agree entirely," Thar said. "Which is something I intend to take care of right away. I know that the mental compulsion and terror waves from my planet affect you very strongly—against which I have been fighting in advance of your arrival. So, since you are affected, it must be made absolute, until in the end you are just living-dead tools of our will. In that state you'll carry out our orders to rekindle our sun."

Silence greeted Agos Thar's pronouncement. Then suddenly something happened.

The Amazon's arms, which had been pinioned behind her back with chain, suddenly whipped forward to the accompaniment of a click as links broke. All the time she had been talking or listening to Thar she had been silently at work on the links. Her hands shot forward and grasped both Agos Thar's ankles. Quite unprepared for the manoeuvre, he staggered and then crashed over on his back.

Instantly the Amazon heaved herself up and her hands closed relentlessly around Thar's neck.

The assembled men moved indecisively, groping for their guns, until at length the Amazon checked them.

"Better not," she advised, trusting they would understand the language. "One has to move on the part of any of you and it's the end of Agos Thar! That's just a warning."

The men hesitated, then turned their attention to Thar as he managed to gasp out a few words.

"Do as she tells you, whatever it may be. She is not the kind of woman to make idle threats."

"Very sensible of you," the Amazon gave a hard grin and kept her hold on Thar, who had now ceased to struggle. "I'll release us, and then I'll tell you what comes next."

Within a minute all five were completely free, still without their guns. The Amazon retained her hold on Agos Thar.

"Get some guns, Abna!" she ordered.

Abna nodded promptly and glanced at the nearest guard, but before he could move the unexpected happened. Agos Thar heaved upwards and, with a gasp, the Amazon held tightly relaxed for a moment, lost her grip and went reeling sideways. She was on her face in the ashly dust before she knew what had happened, and simultaneously the other four Crusaders came upon and battered unmercifully with gun bullets.

Only for a moment was the Amazon incapacitated, then her quick brain reacted. Even as Thar's hand came down toward her, she shot out her right

arm and gripped his wrist. He screamed under the awful pressure as the wrist bone snapped, but it was a scream abruptly cut off as the Amazon lashed up her right foot and kicked him straight in the face. He fell on his back, blood streaming from his cut nose and lip.

Suddenly a gun was jammed in the small of the Amazon's back.

"Better not!" one of the guards said coldly, in awkward English.

The Amazon lowered her arm and waited.

With an effort, Agos Thar got to his feet. Retrieving his whip, he shook out the twin fine metal tails, his vicious eyes on the Amazon's coldly beautiful face. He pushed the whip downwards, with a demonic force. He jerked his head and the Amazon's right eye as he struck her on the face. She tensed for a moment with the pain, then slowly fingered the deep cut which was already starting to bleed.

"Just a slight repayment," Thar explained bitterly, dabbing at his face.

"Some day," the Amazon said slowly, her voice perfectly level, "you'll answer for that whip cut, Agos Thar."

Thar nodded to his men with his sound arm.

"Chain them up again."

The guards obeyed, and the Crusaders were shoved violently over on to their backs.

At Agos Thar's orders, several of the men got shovels and started to dig the ashing and began to dig the soil until they had five narrow, crudely made pits.

"I have decided to subdue you," Thar commented. "You are far too fractious at the moment."

Agos Thar signalled and this time, one by one, the five were dragged to their feet, hauled over to the holes in the ground, and dropped into them. Then the ashly soil was shovelled in around them till they were packed tight to their chains.

"Comfortable?" Agos Thar asked cynically.

"Just what do you hope to gain by this?" the Amazon demanded.

Thar smiled. "I intend to use all five of you as I have said, but by the time I am ready for you I want you to give up your individuality. I think it will be, after this. My colleagues and I have a journey to make to our dead star with the rock we have collected. You will stay where you are until we have responded to the radiations, which do not affect us but which, we realize, have disastrous effects on your particular constitutions."

The Amazon said: "I have already warned you that one day I shall repay you, Agos Thar," and nothing more. "You alone, or are going to do so, can change my decision."

Thar shrugged. "You might die, Amazon—all of you might. Die from madness and hunger and thirst. A vicious combination for all of you to combat, my must agree."

The Amazon did not reply. She closed her eyes as Thar drew back his foot to deliver a smashing kick at her head; but the vicious expected blow did not fall. Instead she smiled.

Then suddenly swinging around, he motioned to his men and led they way back to the space machines. One of the airlocks closed and the machines took off.

"Well, can't you do something?" Thania demanded, with a touch of hysteria.

"I can't do anything," Thania ordered curtly. "You're the one who can help us."

"I?" Abna turned his head.

"Well, this is plainly a matter for metaphysics."

"Sorry, I can't," Abna shook his blond head.

"The Amazon's 'Theodolite' is causing mental disturbance for me to get the required pose necessary."

Nobody said anything. It was just beginning to dawn on them that this was one trick the sadistic Agos Thar had definitely won. And with every moment the sinister waves generated from the "civilized" planet were making their presence felt more and more.

Minutes passed as all five wrestled for an answer. But there wasn't a note, or if there was, they could not hear it, for the noise was enough of it. And because their minds were extraordinarily sensitive and receptive, the more rapid was the deterioration as the waves of disorder, fear and unreasoning had crept into their conceptions.

Suddenly, the Amazon's eyes opened and she

which seemed inseparable from this world. As duty blew in the Crusaders' faces, setting them blinking furiously. In the Amazon's case, the dust grains stuck to the drying blood on her cut face and

CHAPTER III

created appalling irritation—but there was nothing she could do about it.

Then finally, as the miniature whirlwind subsided, Thania let out a scream of protest. "Do something, can't you! We can't put up with this kind of misery any longer."

The others were not asleep, knowing as they did that they were completely helpless as aid her. They watched in anxious sympathy as Thania struggled madly to free herself, but with all her efforts, forced finally to frenzy by the relentless waves-beating down on her, she could not budge a fraction of an inch. So for the rest of the night, her head killing. She seemed hardly alive any more.

So it went on, minute after minute, hour by hour, with only an occasional dust storm to relieve the monotony. Once and once only the zombies came up from below with a load of rockery, and having once deposited it, they returned to the underworld without looking either right or left.

Not that the Crusaders cared any more. Their minds did not seem to be their own any more. They kept on repeating constantly the mental commands which were being dinned at them. There were many of them—too many to differentiate—but the main theme seemed to be to obey, so this they were prepared to do if it meant any relief from their torture.

Finally all five Crusaders closed their eyes and relapsed into something that was close to coma. The next conscious thing they knew was that Agos Thar had returned, his broken spirit and damaged face now apparently restored. One by one, each Crusader was hauled up bodily.

Only then did Thar speak. "From the look of you, Amazon, I would say that much has been accomplished during your absence. Fourteen hours of soaking in the compulsion waves, plus the absence of food and drink, has made your minds and bodies completely subservient to us, which is as I intended."

The Amazon did not answer. She was trying hard to get control over herself, to get life into her. Her head began to hurt as much as one of the guards gave a sharp exclamation.

"Commander, quickly! Come and look!" Thar obeyed, hurrying over to the guard who was holding the slack, unchained figure of Thania in his grip. There was something about her attitude which made momentary reason return to the Amazon's mind. She and the others watched as Thar quickly examined the girl, then he jerked his shoulders in an obviously negative action and dumped her back in the hole from which she had been dragged.

"What's wrong with her?" The Amazon found it extremely hard to talk coherently.

"Dead, if you must know." Thar's voice was laconic. "Evidently not as tough as the rest of you. There are no heartbeats."

"Thania... dead?" Abba repeated. He wanted to let Agos Thar to the ground there and then, but somehow he had not the initiative or the strength.

"That's what I said," Thar confirmed. "Now, move, or you'll die." To the nearest spaceship.

The four Crusaders did not attempt to argue. They passively obeyed and began to walk with the familiar, slouching gait of the underworld zombies. Doing exactly what Agos Thar had said.

Only only did they glance back at the dead face of the teenage girl who had wanted to taste the thrill of life on distant worlds... and found death.

The rest was mechanical. They entered the big control-room of the nearest ship, but took no interest in the surroundings or the equipment, so dulled and over-mastered were their brains. They were given a meal when the vessel got under way into space, but although the food and drink certainly restored their strength, it did nothing to bring their minds back to normal. The Amazon, Abba, Viona and Mexzone were no longer superbeings—except in muscular power. They were zombies like those in the ghost underworld, complete slaves of the radiations pouring forth from Agos Thar's world.

The journey through space to the dead world was not a terribly long one, it seemed. Or maybe it appeared that way to the Crusaders since they were no longer able somehow to assess time or distance. They only knew that through the period they sat and waited—and once even slept—a fair distance must have been covered for the white star came plainly visible through the observation window.

SILENT on their bunks, the four Crusaders sat gazing dully on the dark, sombre mass of what had once been the flaming sun. Agos Thar came in from his own quarters in another part of the space, entered the room briefly through the window and then turned to the Crusaders.

"You should feel honored, my friends," he remarked cynically. "To you falls the privilege of restoring a sun to our cold and lightless system. Consider the window and see how much has been done already."

The quartet rose and looked more closely on the huge, dark area being circled at about 5,000 feet. They simply saw, and that was all. There was no sharp mental picture in their minds, no keen analysis of the situation.

The view was that of an immense dark plain, picked out at various intervals by areas of white which looked like mountains at this height. The four struggled in their minds to realize what the white areas meant. Then Agos Thar explained for them.

"You are looking, my friends, on the millions of square miles of radioactive rock which have been brought here through the centuries by myself and my predecessors. A vast and necessary work, indeed. Observe the mountain range, the mountain range stacked-up rocks, is connected to the next one by a line of more rocks. In fact, this whole solar surface is covered, awaiting the supreme moment when the ignition shall take place. Then indeed all this will fuse, ignite and continue to blaze and emit energy for centuries untold."

The quartet just stared at him, and that was all. He looked at their faces for a moment, then with a gesture of irritation, motioned them back to the bunks. The four turned mechanically, walked back across the control-room and sat down.

For the moment, Thar said, coming over to them, "that is all I have to show you. I know it has penetrated your brains even though there is no visible reaction. Until the time when you are to make the actual journey—the course and direction of which is now engraved in your minds for future use, you will work as our slaves. Regretfully, perhaps to fall so completely from your scientific eminence, but it has to be."

No answer. The quartet on the bunks were too busy with their own mental troubles to listen to Thar. The only thing that had really registered on them was his statement to the effect that they knew now the details of the journey they would eventually make. This was correct, and had evidently been the main purpose of the trip. Photographically, in some odd way, they knew exactly what they would have to do—but everything else was still blurred and somewhat unreal.

"Once we return to the slave planet there is a special detail I must attend to—the matter of your spaceship."

At that, something penetrated the fog in the Amazon's mind. She looked up sharply, her main thought being that the Ultra was the only link with safety.

"What—what about our spaceship?" she questioned, with a curious uncertainty of speech.

"So that stirs your brain to life, does it?" Thar asked, dryly. "You ask what about it? I will tell you. I intend to destroy it. You probably entertain the odd notion that I don't know where it is, but I do. Buried in ash-dust on the central plain. Don't forget that telescopic eyes watched you and your ship since the moment they would ever enter this system. Uninvited, I would add. So, obviously, the machine must be destroyed, even as you must be in the end."

The faint restoration of intelligence which the Amazon had experienced died again and she sat in dumb silence at the thought of the finished ship, which also gripped Abba, Viona and Mexzone. Though they knew what Thar intended doing, though they knew that the destruction of the Ultra would banish forever all their hopes of escape, they did not seem to avert it. Indeed they could not. The power of individual reason was suspended—whether permanently or temporarily they could not tell.

The return to the slave planet was soon completed, the quartet passing some of the time in a crowded sitting room, the others sleeping in a room usually foreign to them. They awakened from the last of these sleeps to the realization that

the vessel had landed back on the ashly plain from which it had started, the only change being that the other space machines which had been present now had disappeared, presumably to their own world.

"It occurs to me," Agos Thar said, surveying the scene outside through the observation window, "that this might be an excellent opportunity for you, my friends, to study these radioactive rocks. They are remarkable, by accident, the power of them, but maybe a first-hand view will be more impressive."

His words sank in but produced no reaction. He turned to his crew of men and singled out two of them. He spoke to them in his own language, then, then opened the airlock, and they stepped outside.

The two guards came into view through the observation window, each carrying a chunk of rock on his shoulder.

"You should find this interesting, my friends," Thar said. "My men are going to deal with your spaceship, under the dust bill out there. Watch carefully."

The quartet did so, looking but not observing. One of the men burrowed into the ground in front of the ashly gray bill under which the Ultra lay hidden, then the second man began to weigh and test the weight of the rock he was carrying.

"Unfortunately perhaps that our two friends outside are going to meet certain death," Thar commented with brutal frankness. "However, they know the glory of dying for a cause. . . . Here, put these on."

The Crusaders found dark goggles being dangled before them. They put them on and then gazed at the plain outside.

"I think we're ready now," Thar commented, and through the goggles the remaining man carrying the piece of rock could be seen hurling it forward. The moment it left his hand he threw himself flat, and his colleague had already done. Not that this availed much, for as the rock struck its opposite number at the base of the buried Ultra there came an overwhelming explosion, exactly like the one which Abba had unwittingly created in the underworld. Then, slowly, came quietness, with radioactive dust and smoke floating away on the breeze.

With a grim chuckle, Agos Thar tugged off his goggles and surveyed the scene.

"I am sorry, my friends, that your space machine has been so ingloriously eliminated," he commented. "I am sorry, but afterwards the impression is that you were already dead."

"Until you are needed again you will join the workers of the underworld and labor in our magnificent quest."

The four rose promptly and walked to the great, yawning entrance which was the entrance to the underworld. They passed through it into the intense glow, walking sure-footedly one behind the other, never once speaking, obeying implicitly the order they had been given.

They looked neither right nor left, their main desire being to mine rock and bring it to the surface, and destroy anybody who tried to prevent them.

How they entered the busy underworld or were absorbed into the vast army of zombie-workers they had no idea. The awareness of events was sharp enough at the time, but afterwards the impression faded and they were left with the realization of having to work and endure the tails of a lash if they slacked for an instant. For there were uniformed workers who were everlastingly prowled and wreaked death or injury should they were thought were not working at full pressure.

Days, weeks, maybe even months, and the Crusaders never spoke to each other, so utterly in subjection were their personalities. This state of affairs would have continued indefinitely had not the unexpected happened.

The Crusaders were all in one particular section of workers, toiling like them in the removal of rocks from their natural bed. Like all the other gangs, they were watched constantly by one or other of the guards. On one of these occasions the guard Viona seemed particularly interested in Viona. The sight of her industrious young figure, the grace and suppleness she epitomized, combined with her coppery hair and the features seemed to stir his basic passions.

That she was young and, despite the

enforced dulness of her mind, alluring, and that was enough for him.

Viona realized this when, in the middle of her work, she suddenly found the guard at her waist, his powerful arm gripping her around the side. He grinned at her as she stared in wonder.

"You know the English language, the language of your planet, and so do I," he explained. "There are ways in which you can get out of this hell-hole. All you've got to do is be nice to me."

Viona did not answer. She felt herself drawn closer as the massive forearm tightened. She wanted to use her own strength to tear free of him, but once again the iron compulsion made her helpless.

"Surely it should not be difficult to be nice to me. Do you have freedom?" the guard murmured, his face close to hers.

He stopped, suddenly aware of two violet eyes staring at him in cold frenzy from nearby. The Amazon had stopped pulling at a rock to watch him, and now something was stirring inside her as she saw Viona pinned helplessly against him. What the emotion was the Amazon did not know, but it was probably the instinct of mother-love, the desire to protect her own, piercing through the dense fog of mental compulsion that surrounded her.

Abna and Mexone stared, too, but they did not act. The breakthrough had not come to them as it had to the Amazon.

"Let that girl alone," the Amazon whispered at last, her every word a threat. "She's my daughter, not a plaything for your dirty hands."

The guard grinned and put his other arm about Viona's waist. The pressure he exerted was so tremendous she gave a sobbing gasp of pain, and that was enough for the Amazon. The tigers in her crashed through the compulsion barrier and she hurtled forward in one of her catlike springs.

The guard turned in slow annoyance as he heard the Amazon behind him, but he did not lose his trusting look of Viona; at least not for a second later when he had to see the Amazon's fist crash into his face, sending him reeling backwards. As it happened, he did not entirely lose his balance for he collided with one of the big drilling machines. He groaned, his head spinning helplessly, and then used the machine to spring himself into action.

Just in time the Amazon whirled away from Viona and stood ready for the onslaught. The guard arrived with the violence of a 10-ton truck, and with like violence he came to a stop, his head jarring backward by the iron compulsion of his own knuckles. Nor did he stop there: She rained blow after blow on him as he tried to dodge her onslaught.

Finally, half the senses thrashed out of him, he crashed over on the dusty, rocky floor, his hands flung out helplessly in front of him, and that action jerked him back to alertness. Quietly, he raised his head and saw a heavy metal bar used for prising rock out of the walls. In that moment he had a weapon, and he turned it to account as the Amazon plunged on him. Just in time she saw the bar and overstepped impatiently on to the very force of her own action. With a jerk she slowed up and then spun around at incredible speed even while the guard was struggling painfully to his feet. Instantly she had grasped the bar and held it full length in both her hands, her fingers gripping each end.

"Quite clever, my friend," she said coldly, her violet eyes smouldering. "But you weren't quick enough, were you?"

The others looked on dumbly.

The guard remained silently uneasy, watching the Amazon. He moved a little as she made an effort to raise the Amazon's hand, the metal bar as simply as an ordinary person might bend a warm candle.

"There!" she said finally, critically surveying the metal "U" imprisoned between her hands. "Quite an excellent collar for my friend."

Before the guard could grasp what was coming, the Amazon jumped to his side and flung the "U" over his head and shoulders. It dropped to his neck, and once there, the Amazon began to tighten the ends of the bar, pulling the two ends over each other and thereby forming a tightening noose of metal.

The guard tore frantically and uselessly at the "collar" which was choking the life out of him, but his strength was not equal to the force of the bar one fraction as strong as steel. Once he realized this he flung himself on the Amazon in sheer blind fury

and panic. Quickly she dodged, but not quite soon enough. The bar struck her across the back of the head with numbing force, straight upon a nerve centre. She blacked out, immediately and soundly, so her face lay head half buried in a pile of loose chippings.

Viona, Mexone and Abna, still not free of compulsion, could do nothing but gaze dully, and so indeed did the workers. They all watched the guard about his strange and fatal collision; then, when they turned and looked at the sprawled Amazon with her head half buried in the stone chippings. Each member of the Crusaders knew that something ought to be done, but they could not determine what. So they continued to wait, only resuming work as other guards glanced in their direction. But the other guards did not come and investigate. So far as they knew, and could see, everything was all right. The distance was too great for them to detect the strangled guard on the floor.

Then, at last, the Amazon began to move. The momentarily numbed nerve centre reasserted itself and life began to return. She pulled herself out of the stone chippings and considered the situation—considered something particularly disturbing happened to herself. She felt incredibly normal, sharply intelligent, devoid of senseless rage, fully able to plan her next move. In a word, she was as she had always been, without a trace of overpowering compulsion.

Since the power of reason had returned, she used it to the full, even as she surveyed the strangled guard and the quietly working Viona, Abna and Mexone. Yet, even as she weighed things, she felt her mind slipping again as waves of compulsion began to enter their way into her brain. She frowned. The momentary deadening of the nerve centres of her brain could not have brought the strange surcease from domination, so there must be another reason. . . . And there seemed to her to be only one answer.

"Abruptly, before her mind became too cloudy, she flung herself back into the stone chippings, dragging them once more over her head and allowing just enough room to breathe. Here she remained, so paralyzed that nothing had happened, an incredible and wonderful thing. The compulsion had ceased. She could not feel it any more. Nor had she felt it since the moment she had buried herself in the chippings. She smiled to herself and then she began to emerge from the stone, but the compulsion came back, but only weakly. She was complete master of it, and herself, at least for the present.

She acted immediately, taking advantage of the fact that there was no surveillance to worry over at the moment. As fast as possible she seized Viona and thrust her on the floor, burying her head in the chippings. . . . Then, as the dazed girl at length emerged, Abna was treated to the same procedure. And finally Mexone. The task, incidentally, the four stood looking at each other in perplexity.

"What's happened?" Viona asked at last. "I feel almost normal again. Just a bit of mental perturbation, but I can easily offset it. At least for a while."

"For about eight hours, as near as I can calculate," the Amazon lowered quickly. "That's about as long as our wills can remain superior to the compulsion, then back we'll go under the influence. I don't know how it is, but these chippings are insulative to the extremely short waves of thought. I found it by accident, and I only came to realize that we're going to take enormous advantage of it."

"No question about that," Abna confirmed grimly.

"We'll make rough helmets," the Amazon went on, glancing about her. "We'll use our own judgment as to when to use them, but we ought to be able to keep our minds more or less free from compulsion for quite a long time to come. Naturally we'll play dumb as far as our captors are concerned."

Mexone looked troubled. "Quite a good idea, Amazon, but where does it get us in the end? We can't beat the mob in control of this underworld, and we've lost the Ultra, so we can't escape into space. Just what are we going to do?" "I'll be glad to let you be above," the Amazon replied briefly. "Even if we're powerless to escape us, we can at least die gloriously. These zombies were freeing, and that sadist of an Agos Thas wants teaching a lesson. Those are our main objectives."

We'll think of something, even if we have to steal a spaceship to make good our escape into the void—that's all." The Amazon broke off abruptly. "Somebody's coming. Get ready!"

Instantly the four changed their expressions to dumb vagueness and drifted back mechanically to their former tasks of hauling forth rock, and stacking it in neat piles, as did the rest of the zombies. As they did so, a couple of guards from one of the mining sectors just outside the mine suddenly they were puzzled and furious at discovering one of their number dead. Between them they managed to pull away the garrotting metal bar, then one of them turned and began bringing her to attention by splash of his whip.

"What do you know about this?" he demanded, pointing to the dead guard. But all he received was a dull stare of the violet eyes, while Abna, Viona, and Mexone went on working thoughtlessly.

"Answer me," the guard commanded, felling the Amazon to the floor with one blow of his powerful arm. "Who did this?"

The Amazon did not answer; and in fact nobody did. The guard used his whip with devilish force, but the Amazon took the lash across her back and made no sound, and the guard, not knowing the reason for the guard, otherwise he would have suffered a broken neck for his pains.

"Why waste time?" the other guard asked finally. "We'll get nothing out of them, and possibly they didn't do it. I'll see how they could, the way their minds are held."

In the end the matter was dropped. The dead guard was picked up and carried away, and after a while a new guard took his place. Probably the matter was reported, but certainly nothing more was heard of it.

The Crusaders took action of sorts when their shift ended. Each managed to conceal and take away some of the precious chippings, and this performance they repeated every time their shift ended. Though they were imprisoned with other zombies during the night, and "other zombies" was really no detriment since the poor devils were too dull to apprehend what was going on and usually slept heavily all through their rest period.

Not so the Crusaders. Little by little each of them fashioned a small cap, using rough fabric from the thousands of scraps of clothing that littered the world, and gluing the stone chippings in pebble-dash fashion to the cloth. It was a slow and sticky business, the adhesive being a gummy, tenuous product used as a by-product in the general slave business of mining rocks, ores, and in places, crude oil.

In a fortnight each Crusader had a protective cap, easily carried in their tights, and on every possible occasion they were worn.

Gradually the constant nullification of the compulsion waves gave the Crusaders comparative independence, enough for them to run eight to nine hours at a stretch under their own will power. The more they used the caps the more their wills exerted themselves.

The last name change. The arrogant Agos Thas returned, or the scene, accompanied by a couple of guards. It was only about an hour after the quartet had commenced their daily shift when he arrived, so they were quite clear mentally and full of confidence for change in their modus operandi before very long.

For quite a time Thas stood watching their activities, then with a crack of his vicious whip he brought their endeavors to an abrupt stop. He stood measuring them with his merciless eyes, and they felt their hair rise as they towered in his glaring down the overpowering desire to explode into vengeful rage. Particularly the Amazon, with whom the memory of the dead Thas was still a dominant theme.

"So, my friends, I gather that by now you have learned secrets. That commented drily. "The time has arrived for you to carry out the project for which you have been selected."

"You mean," the Amazon asked, hatingly, "the kindling of your dead sun?"

"That is exactly what I mean. You know the route into space—you know precisely what has to be done. As I said before, to you four belongs the job of leading the air force into the void, and afterwards I and my colleagues will expand in power to limits as yet undreamed of."

Silence. Fixed, uncomprehending stares. Thas stared, too, for a moment, as though he were trying

to read something from the dead-pan faces. When he did not succeed, he motioned briefly.

"The time is now," he said curtly. "A space machine has been brought for you, one that will never be needed again since, as you already know, this is to be a one-way journey." *He smiled.*

A signal followed and the two attending guards sprang into action with their guns ready. The Amazon gave Abna and the others a brief, knowing glance and then started to walk, mechanically, through the busy zombie-like industry of the underworld, its surface, its surface, its surface.

The first thing the four saw as they continued marching was the outline of two fairly large space-ships, and toward the nearest of these they were directed by the guards. Agos Thar coming up in the rear. When the spaceship was reached he called a halt and smiled at the others with a pleasant smile.

"I am aware," he said, "that this must seem an inglorious end for you, presumably so mighty in your achievements. But console yourselves with the honor of what you are doing. Now listen carefully and let the final instructions sink into your brains. The ship will be loaded with the usual complement of equal proportions of negative and positive rock. I call it that for convenience. You will travel to the dead sun and never alter speed. All you will do is set the course on minus nine and drive with it. Out of the ship, you will see that you will finally strike the dead sun directly across a range of rock, which rock is in turn linked up with all the other rock on the dead sun's face. The outcome of that should be plain to you: Instant fusion and a cosmic holocaust in which you will perish."

Silence. Four pairs of eyes stared dully and fixedly.

"You understand the orders?" Thar snapped.

"We understand the orders," the Amazon answered deliberately. "We travel on course minus nine without alteration of speed."

"Correct. . . . Now depart."

The Amazon turned from the airlock and entered the control-room. With like deliberation Abna, Viona and Mekone followed her. Only when the airlock was closed did Abna expel a long sigh of relief.

"Keeping control over one's emotions in the face of provocation is the hardest job ever," he commented. "If he'd have said much more I'm afraid I'd have gunned the works up by knocking him down."

"Fortunate that you didn't," the Amazon murmured; then after a quick survey of the instrument board and its layout she grasped what was obviously the power switch and pulled it over.

Instantly there was a blasting roar from the power plant and the spaceship hurtled skywards with tremendous velocity, sending the four staggering backwards with this acceleration. Then suddenly a click and, automatically, gravity-nullifiers came into operation, producing more tolerable conditions.

Recovering her balance, the Amazon checked the control panel, set the pointer on the course-guide to minus nine, and then turned to face the others. They watched her as she pulled her small insulating rock cap from a pocket in her tights and placed it on her head.

"You'd better do the same," she advised. "We can't take a lot of chances, and the nearer we are to that so-called civilized planet the more severe will be the compulsion effect."

The others put their caps on and then Abna glanced at the Amazon curiously.

"So far, Vi," he said, "you've done exactly as Thar ordered. But why we're not going to continue to that dead star on the directed course?"

"Most certainly we're not," Mekone said decisively. "We've got a spaceship of sorts and mental freedom, so there's nothing to prevent us getting away into space and escaping this system forever, grateful the future will give the planet the measure of freedom those poor devils of zombies. To that end we are dedicated. Right?"

The Amazon shrugged. "As to that, I don't know—but I do know that there are two things to be done before we depart. First, we have to avenge Thania and ourselves in the fullest measure; and secondly, we have to bring the measure of freedom to those poor devils of zombies. To that end we are dedicated. Right?"

The others nodded slowly.

"Right," the Amazon said. "We're not going to that dead star. We're going to demand an ultimatum to the government of the civilized planet from which Agos Thar comes. We're going to make certain demands, and we're going to see that they're satisfied."

"How can we be sure of that?" Abna questioned. "We might be attacked even as we approach the planet."

The Amazon smiled coldly. "I think not, Abna. They won't be anxious to attack this vessel which Thar assured us is loaded with positive and negative rocks. What I propose to do is issue the ultimatum, and if it is not obeyed we will drop our entire content of positive and negative rock on the planet. Inevitably the planet will be almost, if not completely, destroyed. I don't doubt that our orders will be complied with to the letter."

"And what are they?"

"Agos Thar is to come with us to the dead sun and be present at the rekindling. He has carefully avoided that suicidal performance, but he's not going to escape so easily. In fact," the Amazon added, clenching her yellow fist, "he's not going to escape at all. He's to get a few of them, restore them to normal, and they'll be able to do the rest themselves. Once cut off from the mental compulsion, they'll be able to rise again in full power, even more so with a sadist like Agos Thar wiped out."

"The Amazon nodded. "Good idea, Viona. Much better than mine. Right, first let's check up how much rock we have on board."

"Suppose, instead of returning to the civilized world and letting them see we've escaped, we go instead to the ghost world and instruct the zombies in the art of using the pebble helmets? We only need to show them a few of them, restore them to normal, and they'll be able to do the rest themselves. Once cut off from the mental compulsion, they'll be able to rise again in full power, even more so with a sadist like Agos Thar wiped out."

"The Amazon nodded. "Good idea, Viona. Much better than mine. Right, first let's check up how much rock we have on board."

This was a comparatively simple matter and revealed the surprising fact that nearly three-quarters of the vessel, in the storage holds, was loaded with the deadly cargo.

Somewhat sobered by her appraisal, the Amazon led the way back into the control-room and glanced through the window. The disc of the dead star, their intended destination if Thar had his way, was a long way off and appeared only faintly discernable. But the miles of the civilized planet was not too distant. An hour's flight would bring it close.

"Well, here we go!" the Amazon said decisively, turning from a contemplation of the leering face in the void. "From here on I fancy Agos Thar is in for an uncomfortable time. He will not be allowed to forget Thania—ever!"

CHAPTER IV

THE Amazon changed the course of the spaceship and swung its nose toward the "civilized" planet, then she began to speak into a microphone, presently found a television transmitter-receiver.

At first, when they turned it on, they got only flashing pictures and a continuous high-pitched shriek in the sound system. Then finally the picture cleared and the image of Agos Thar, a tall, thin, shrunken figure, appeared in a deep bass hum of power.

There was a man on the screen, attired in light and easy clothing. After a fashion he was not at all bad looking. At the moment he was staring in bewilderment into his own screen, evidently seeing a picture of the Amazon's and Abna's faces, with a view of spaceship control-room behind them.

Suddenly he spoke, in the urgent gibberish. The Amazon cut him short and moved forward so that only she was visible on the screen.

"I am," the Amazon said, "the Amazon, the Amazon, the Amazon who understands my language," she said, slowly and deliberately, and hoped that she would be understood. To her surprise the man gave a quick reply.

"I understand your language perfectly, as do many others here. Are you not the Golden Amazon?"

"I am," the Amazon assented. "I have an urgent message for your governing body, or ruler, or whatever he is. Let me converse with him."

The operator nodded, got up from his chair and went out of the picture. The Amazon glanced at the others.

"Take control of this vessel, Abna, while I talk," she ordered. "Bring it to a halt above the 'civilized' planet. If you can't arrange a hover, then keep on going very slowly in a circuit of the globe. Stay at about 1,000 feet so we can be seen."

planet. If you can't arrange a hover, then keep on going very slowly in a circuit of the globe. Stay at about 1,000 feet so we can be seen."

Abna nodded and turned to the controls. Viona and Mekone stood together, watching the television screen. Presently they appeared on it, a white-haired, patriarchal-looking man with sad dark eyes. He studied the screen-bearing the image of the Amazon's face, and then spoke in a soft, pleasing voice.

"I am President Semna, the recognized ruler of the major country of this planet. I understand you are the Golden Amazon of far-distant Earth."

"You understand correctly," the Amazon was polite, but frigid. She was trying to decide in her mind whether she liked him or not. It was with a sad dark eye that he surprised her to discover that he had no feelings of resentment toward him. His personality projected itself as kindly and tolerant, which was a decided surprise.

"I have a proposition to put to you, President Semna," the Amazon continued. "In fact, it's more than a proposition: It's an ultimatum. I dislike forcing it upon you, but I'm afraid the blame that makes it necessary lies with Commander Agos Thar, who, I understand, is your scientific adviser as well as being an important member in your military force."

President Semna gave a tired smile. "You have designated Agos Thar correctly, Amazon. He is also a despot—or have you gathered that already?"

"That is exactly what I've gathered," the Amazon assented, "though I must confess to surprise at hearing you admit the fact. One would have thought that—"

"Agos Thar has the whole of this planet under his domination," Semna interrupted, anger coming into his fine eyes. "He has gained that position by lies, trickery, and a complete disregard for the feelings of his own people. In short, yes, he is an anything more than a figurehead, and my life is in constant danger. Thar alone rules, and behind him are all the unwanted elements of our society. He has had control for many years. I had hoped that you and your friends arrived from outer space that there would be a change, but I realize it was wrong. From what I have heard, you and those with you have fallen before him."

"You underestimate us," the Amazon said, with a grim smile. "At the moment we're supposed to be making a suicide leap to your dead sun, for the purpose of rekindling it. A worthy cause, no doubt, but it doesn't warrant committing suicide to bring it about when long-distance remote control instruments could do it just as easily. Nor does it warrant the slavery of a neighbor planet and the destruction of their way of life. In those things Agos Thar has succeeded so far, but he has a score to settle, not only for his brutality in general but for his cold disregard of the death of one of our number."

Semna sighed and gave a shrug. "I am afraid, Amazon, that murder—and things even worse than murder—rest but lightly on Agos Thar's shoulders. As to your ultimatum, I am acquainted with all the details. Perhaps you would enlighten me?"

The Amazon did so, giving all the facts. The only thing she suppressed was the discovery of the nullifying stone chippings. Semna listened with dignified silence to all she had to say, then he spread his hands.

"And what, Amazon, do you imagine you can do? What right have you to speak of an ultimatum? By your own admission, Thar has caused one of your number to die, and he has blasted your spaceship machine into dust. He has even sent you on the way to the dead sun, rekindling it, so what can you do about it? I gather you have found a way to circumvent the compulsion waves which Thar himself devised, but even that does not give you firm control."

"You overlook the fact that we could escape into space and leave this system far behind," the Amazon said.

Semna shook his maned head. "I think not, Amazon, even though I wish for your sake that that were the case. This planet has telescopic eyes and can see you from all sides. You could never escape. Thar would not be so lax as to let you."

After a moment the Amazon asked: "Where is your home?"

"In his own headquarters. He has not been back long from his journey to what you call the zombie world."

Then here is my ultimatum. He will join us.

The Amazon glanced at the starry abyss into which the space machine had gone. She looked at the distant, leering face. Then she caught the bitter glances of the others.

"All right," she said quietly, shrugging. "So you won't be the last trick after all, Thar. What happens now?"

"Death!—Death for all of us in the mighty holocaust of this sun when it is touched off. I will die and you, too—all of you, a just revenge for your effort to try to—"

She attempted to resume her aim to too bated on my planet for that to happen. And for your part, there is nobody to that to save you. The only one who might have done so is dead, and your ship is destroyed. We have it to ourselves, my friends, and with this rock in my hand, I am the judge and arbiter of your fate."

The four did not say anything. Fikely they watched for what Agos Thar would do next . . . and his actions somewhat surprised them.

For suddenly he turned, the rock still in his hand, and hurried to the nearest towering hill of rock and began to climb it slowly. After a while his voice came as he paused for a moment.

"You wonder what I'm doing?" I'll tell you, my clever friends. I am going to climb to the top of that hill, and then I will drop this piece of rock. The moment it strikes this hillside of 'opposite number' rock the holocaust and death will come. I intend to do it when I am ready, when I have driven your nerves to breaking point. . . . And there is no doubt about it. The voice rose to a hysterical shout in the helmet phones. "If you try to shoot me down I shall simply fall and the rock will go just the same. You think you haven't the weapons to shoot me, but you have. Those barrelled instruments on your belts are guns, not clivers as you probably think. Another trick lost, clever ones."

With that final outburst, Thar resumed climbing. The quartet on the plain, bitterly conscious of their helplessness, watched him go, catching their breath at intervals as he slipped on his in his haste. But never once did he let go of the rock—and so finally he reached the top of the hill, an almost remote puppet figure 300 feet above.

"Now, my friends, prepare yourselves!" His voice came quite clearly over the radio. "I regret only one thing, that you will not have the pleasure of the death that is about to befall you. It will be over all too quickly. The moment this rock falls to this hill on which I stand, ignition will take place and that will be the end! Watch! Watch closely!"

Even as he gave the order, Thar began to raise the rock. He moved it forward, he moved to the base of the hill and started up at him.

"I'm afraid there's no answer to this," Abna said grimly. "For the first time in our lives we're caught out. There isn't even time to work it out in my metaphysics."

"What's the matter with him?" Viona asked suddenly, pointing. "He's looking at something. See!"

The others saw in a moment what Viona meant. Suddenly, for a reason best known to himself, Thar had raised the rock. His arm had dropped again and the rock was in his hand. But his attitude was tense as he stared at something beyond the vision of the quartet—something that was evidently in the sky, to judge from the attitude of the lone figure on the hilltop.

Only a few almost over Agos Thar himself, a monstrous gray shape moving at fair speed became abruptly visible. It seemed undeniably long as it cleaved through the starry heaven, its many outlook windows ablaze with light.

"The Ultra!" screamed the voice of Mexone, in utter disbelief.

The others did not answer, because they could not. With their own eyes they had seen the Ultra blown up—and besides, there was something else gripping their attention. A long grappling chain trailing from the Ultra's base.

They realized what the idea was even as Thar himself must have done so. His lone figure twirled suddenly on the summit of the hill as he made a dive for the edge of the cliff. But he was seconds too late. The swinging grappling chain struck him on the back of the head as he made to descend from the ridge, and instantly he was flung like a bullet into space, his scream in the helmet phones nearly splitting the eardrums of the four who heard—and watched.

"The rock!" Viona yelled suddenly, and dove forward like one gone mad.

For once her brain reacted more quickly than

that of her mother, father or Mexone. For as Thar was swept to death from the hillside, the rock was naturally released from his grip and ejected forward as he hurtled, his helmet and skull crushed like eggs into space.

It was in her hand when Viona moved so fast. Her eyes were on that white chunk as it came sailing downwards. Chippings of stone flew under her great boots, her arms thrust outward as she stumbled and ran with breakneck speed. She felt as though she were being pulled down into the abyss, down into her outstretched forearms, numbing them with the impact. She tripped, gulped, and fell over, with the rock, clutched to her. There she lay, gulping breath from the spacesuit's air containers and shaking her head in slight amazement.

The others came up quickly and Abna hauled her to her feet. She stood trembling, the deadly rock clutched to her.

"Good word, Viona," the Amazon said breathlessly. "We'd have been extinct by now if you hadn't moved as fast as you did."

"Yes . . ." Viona gave a huge gulp. "Yes . . . I know. Only the thickness of my body between the two rocks. Where? I feel as though I've been turned inside out."

"How did the Ultra get here?" Mexone demanded. "That's the part I can't understand."

"We will . . . and soon," the Amazon replied, watching the enormous spaceship as it cruised around in a vast circle, still trailing its length of grappling chain.

It would seem that Agos Thar got his deserts, anyway. Abna remarked, presently taking his eyes from the Ultra. "I'll go and see what's left of him. I watched where he fell."

Turning, he went away up the hillside, and while he was gone the Ultra came down rather jerkily to the plain and then became still. Abna returned to the waiting three and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not a very pleasant sight," he commented. "Thar is completely dead, with half his head crushed in against his helmet completely gone. It looks as though—"

He stopped, staring with the others at the Ultra. The airlock had opened and a fan of light was casting outwards across the dark plain. Against the light stood one figure in a spacesuit, frantically waving.

"Can—can it possibly be Thania?" Abna exclaimed at length.

"Only one way to find out," the Amazon answered briskly. "Let's get the Ventrup by moving toward the spaceship with the others following her."

In very short time the distance was covered and entry made into the big, familiar control-room. The airlock was closed and the pressure restored to normal, then as the solitary controller of the giant spaceship struggled out of the enveloping spacesuit there was no longer any room for doubt. The gray, mischievous eyes, the tousled mop of blonde hair, the slimy girlish figure in space-slacks and a silk blouse. Yes, it was Thania all right.

"Well, Thania," Abna remarked, "to judge his spaceship 'seems a suitable moment to quote a famous Earth remark. 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume?'"

"I don't know what you mean by that, Abna, but thank heaven I came in time," Thania responded. "As far as I could judge, Agos Thar was threatening you."

"That," the Amazon said grimly, "is the biggest understatement I've heard yet. He was on the verge of creating an inferno, and in spite of your work with that grappling chain, he might have succeeded, though I am sure you and not Viona literally jumped to the occasion and saved all of us."

Thania looked puzzled. "How do you mean?" As briefly as she could, the Amazon explained. Then she asked: "How does it happen that you appear like this, so providentially? Thar told us you were dead. He examined you and said you were. Most certainly you looked it."

The girl looked mystified. "That I don't understand. I only know that I came to myself in the pit they had dug for me, as they did for you. I was terribly weary and my brain was buzzing with crazy ideas. But when I came to, I found myself strangely enough I found that I wasn't chained and that my body was free to move. There didn't seem to be anybody in sight, and the spaceships had disappeared. Somehow I managed to climb out of the pit and found the way to which you had been completely empty. I felt alone—terribly alone—and enormously scared."

"I submitted, rightly or wrongly, that you had been taken away somewhere but that I had been

left behind for a reason unknown." So I investigated and found the Ultra under its own covering. I got inside it, closed the airlock door, then opened it and controls as I have seen you do so often. The Ultra took off into space, and at a distance of several thousand miles away I stopped to think what I ought to do."

"And then?" the Amazon questioned, as the girl paused.

"Well, then it seemed to me that my job was to find out what had happened to the rest of you. I was the only one who could possibly effect a rescue, the only one with a spaceship. And our own spaceship, the Ultra, at that. But you had stored myself to health with the various medicines we have on board. I ate, slept, and thought. And I could think clearly inside this Ultra there is no effect from the mental conditions. I reasoned out what I must do, and it seemed that the only thing possible was to watch the ghost planet for some signs of you. I had arrived at the conclusion that probably you had been taken into the underworld of the zombies."

"A most excellent solution," the Amazon smiled.

"So I realized, I didn't approach the ghost planet for fear of being seen, so I remained where I was in space and kept the planet's surface under constant observation with the high-power telescope. Watching through it I actually saw you, Agos Thar, and the others emerge to the surface. I saw you, but not Thar, take off into space. At a good distance I followed you as you headed to this dead sun. I saw you swing off to the civilized planet. I saw you pick up somebody from a small spaceship, and it was when you landed on the surface of this dead star and your spaceship suddenly took off without you. I realized something grim was probably about to happen. I could see that somebody was in a spot, and I was sure you were in a spot. I didn't identify. I took a chance and guessed it to be Agos Thar. What he intended I didn't know, but I knew he couldn't be up to any good. So I decided to act. I started the Ultra on the move to this dead star. As I was approaching I saw a lone figure on one of the hills, a chunk of rock in his hand."

"I didn't quite know what to do," Thania finished worriedly. "I took the only chance and dropped a grapple chain from the floor trap. I had the mechanical equipment of the Ultra, and I saw the solitary figure, which was down in a matter of seconds, and the Ultra was automatically set on course. Then the chain knocked Thar off the hill. You know the rest."

"Splendid work," the Amazon said admiringly, putting her hand on Thania's young girl shoulder. "You acted with skill and courage, Thania—in fact, like a true Crusader. I'm proud of you; as I'm sure we all are."

The others nodded urgent acquiescence, but Thania gave a little shiver.

"Thar afraid I would have thought twice about that chain if I'd realized Thar was carrying a piece of rock which could have transformed this dead star into a raging sun."

"Evidence was with you," the Amazon said. Then she turned to look vaguely puzzled, and added: "I wish I could understand why Thar made such a mistake regarding your death. He unchained you to make a thorough examination, decided you were dead, and pitched you back into the pit as a corpse. Yet he had really happened was that you had passed out."

"There's one answer," Abna mused. "And the only possible one. Thar once said that the anatomy of his race and ours is totally different, even though we look the same externally. It's possible that he felt Thar's heart and pulses were not the same—none—felt in the wrong place, to put it bluntly, and because he detected no reaction he assumed she was dead. Her breathing would be extremely shallow due to her unconsciousness. It's the only answer."

"Yes, you're probably right," the Amazon agreed. "That still leaves us with a problem," Viona pointed out. "We saw Thar blow up the Ultra. At least he thought—and we thought—he did."

"I was sure I can answer that," Thania said. "When I was looking at the Ultra, I saw it was one of those brief but tremendous dust storms on the plain where the Ultra had been: I saw it from above. I would suggest that the dust piled up in a hill over the spot where the Ultra had been, making things look almost as if I assume Thar didn't seem to be there too closely."

"He left it entirely to his mind," the Amazon

said, "Yes, that was probably it. Thania. He left too much to chance and blew up a ship that wasn't there."

"From all of which," Viona said, "spreading her hands, "we can safely say that Agos. That our smarted himself. Good! It was no more than he deserved. And we're left with a problem on our hands. What do we do now?"

"Finish the job we started," the Amazon answered curtly.

"She crossed to the Ultra's television equipment and switched it on. After a moment or two the familiar station of the "civilized" planet appeared on the screen.

"The Golden Amazon speaking," the Amazon said, as the announcer's familiar face appeared on the screen. "I would like to have communication with your president."

"I'm listening, Amazon."

There was the usual brief delay and then the president appeared. He sat down and looked at the screen, a curious mixture of hope and bewilderment reflected in his dark eyes.

"I'm surprised to hear from you, Amazon," he said quietly. "It was more than convinced that Agos Thar would have found a way to dispose of you."

The Amazon smiled tautly. "The only person disposed of is himself, President Senna."

"Yes, his death," the Amazon said. There was sudden relief on the patriarchal face.

"Completely. On the dead star he hoped to make into a new sun. Which brings me to the reason for contacting you."

"I'm entirely ready to listen to anything you have to say. You have given me wonderful news, Amazon, telling me of the death of Commander Thar. Perhaps at last I will have a chance to exert my authority with him out of the way."

"That is my hope, and belief, Mr. President. But first, I think I have to say to you that I am going to make conditions because, with such a man as you, I believe those conditions can be made and adhered to. You will appreciate that we, as Crusaders, have a task to finish before we can consider our obligations discharged."

"Of course. Speak on."

"At the moment we are based on the dead star. It's all ready for touching off into an atomic holocaust which will turn it into the sun you so desperately desire. I am prepared to undertake the task from a safe distance, under certain conditions."

"Name them."

"You will immediately withdraw the plutonium sulphide Face from the heavens and destroy the machines which hold your neighbor slave race in domination. They are to be set free. You understand?"

"Only too clearly." Senna gave his tired smile. "And I will do it willingly, Amazon. As you already know, I never did agree with Thar's ruthless policy. You will give the order now to have the machines destroyed and the Face removed."

The Amazon was silent for a long moment, her intense eyes searching the aged face. Then she nodded slowly.

"Yes, I believe you," she said quietly. "When I see the slave people emerge, your dead sun will be reborn, and we will depart, never to return."

Senna said seriously: "You have accomplished a great thing, you and your comrades of a far-off world. I shall never forget you for it."

"The rest, then, is up to you. Farewell."

With that she cut off the television instrument and glanced at the others.

"Nothing to do now but wait," she said. "We'd better get something on to a point near the ghost world—near enough to be able to drop a message on it, anyway."

"Message?" Abna frowned as he glanced at her.

"What message are you referring to?"

The Amazon glanced down from the metal foiling on which she was inscribing a message with a stylus. Finally she put it in a container, screwed the cap tightly, and then explained.

"When the zombies come from the underworld, released from their RV-like bondage, it will take them long to recover their former obviously good intelligence. The point I am making is that when that happens they will be able to read the message I've put in this capsule. It tells them briefly about the chipping which is built-form an insulation against terror waves. It gives them a weapon to fight with if at any time in the future they should be subjected again."

"Nice idea," Abna approved, "though for myself I completely trust President Senna."

The Amazon shrugged. "So, in general, do I. But it's always as well to be on the safe side. Right, then, that's settled. Let's get going."

Abna moved to the switchboard and operated the controls. At once the Ultra took off from the desolate plain and hurtled into the gulf. In a matter of an hour, moving at well under quarter speed, it was within 50 miles of the ghost world, the five travellers looking down on the wrecked and tumbled civilization. Once again they had to play the waiting game.

Hours passed before anything happened, and then it was something which seemed to presage the fact that President Senna was going to keep his word. For the Face, that sinister visage which for so long had terrorized an entire race, faded from sight. The void was clear, gleaming coldly with stars.

"Good," the Amazon approved. "Now for the last part of this interstellar drama."

This, however, was a good deal longer in coming—a period reckoned in several spells of sleeping and eating. Then at last Viona, whose turn it was to be on the watch, saw an odd sight.

"They're coming!" she exclaimed. "Out of the underworld—dozens of them."

The others were not long in joining her, and for a time they watched the varicolored tide of people they crawled out of the underworld, men and women in their right minds and plainly trying to grasp why terror and compulsion had been removed from them. Through the powerful telescope which the Amazon turned upon them, their expressions were plainly visible, expressions which reflected both an overwhelming relief and wonder.

"They're sane enough," the Amazon said, peering intently through the eyepiece. "Drop that capsule, Viona. I want to make sure they pick it up."

Viona did as instructed. After a moment there was the click of the floor ejector and the tiny capsule dropped into space outside and was almost immediately lost to sight because of its smallness.

It evidently landed all right some time later because the Amazon saw a number of people sauntering towards a given spot—and the Amazon, having the closest view of all, watched as a man picked the capsule up. He gazed in bewilderment around him, then turned to speak to the throng jostling around him.

"They'll sort it out in time," she said. "Now we'd better keep our part of the bargain. Viona, stand by the frontal long-distance ejector."

Viona obeyed, and stood with her hand on the release button.

The Amazon nodded her satisfaction and gave further orders.

Mexone, put that chunk of rock in the ejector-chamber, ready for release. Abna, get busy on the computer and let me know when we have reached exactly 200 miles from the dead sun. Thania, take visual observation and report progress."

Then the Amazon pulled over the power lever and sent the Ultra hurtling into the gulf in a gigantic curve until at length the nose was pointed toward the dead star.

"This is a matter of flawless timing," she said tensely, her eyes on the instruments. "I intend to cross that dead star at half the speed of light. When we have reached almost that speed we ought to be 200 miles away, which is enough for the gravity of the dead sun to claim the rock. But we've got to get clear when the blast goes. Right, here we go!"

She switched the decelerators to maximum to counter the terrific drag set up by the velocity. Faster and faster still the Ultra sliced through the gulf. The dead star increased in size by leaps and

bounds, visible as a dead gray circle with whiter spots where the hills of rock were lying.

"Two hundred!" Abna snapped at last.

"Fire!" the Amazon ordered simultaneously.

Viona pressed the ejector button and announced curtly: "Rock gone!"

The Amazon snapped a switch and purple blinds shot up over the windows. Then she pulled the power lever over even farther and gave a hoarse order.

"On the floor, the lot of you! Cover your eyes and hope for the best."

Instantly they all flung themselves flat, and were held there by the terrific pace the Ultra was making. They waited through agonizing seconds, their eyes closed and their arms flung over them. They wondered if after all they had hit the wrong type of rock and lost their "flashpoint," so long did the waiting seem.

For a second—a brilliance beyond imagination—blasted through the purple window shields; through the uplifting arms, through the tightly closed eyelids. Brief though it was, there was surely nothing so incredibly effulgent than the instant release of millions of ergs of energy in one mighty burst.

The five hung on to themselves, breathing hard, perspiration running down their faces and spots of green light bounding before their infinitely spindly eyes. Then, gradually, the Amazon dared to lift her head. Blazing sunlight was pouring through the window shields. The control-room was as hot as the edge of Hades, outside, a mighty ball of ungodly, irrefragable incandescence came to their eyes. So much the Amazon glimpsed, then she lowered her head again and closed her eyes against the light.

Minutes passed. She looked again. The glare was less. More minutes, as the Ultra winged its way at the speed of the terrific pace the Ultra was making, and on, its velocity ever increasing, until at last the control-room was gloomily dark—dark, that is, by comparison with the unbearable light of the earlier moments. Only then did the Amazon stir, and the others with her.

She crossed to the switchboard and pressed the button which allowed the purple shields to fly back into place. Silently the five gazed on to the eternal void, and saw a large, first-magnitude sun, alone in its grandeur, a red sun, to be kindred for unguessable ages to come by drifting atomic dust in the cosmos, tides of radiation, and all those other mystic energies with which the Almighty sees fit to endow the matter of the universe, heat, and life.

"Well, we did it," the Amazon said quietly, at last, looking back. "In less than an hour that star will be a pinpoint, at our present speed. In two hours it will be as though it had never existed. The adventure is finished with, and if you ask me, a job well done."

There was silence for a moment, then Thania said slowly: "Yes, we've finished with that adventure, but maybe we've flown into another one."

"Another one?" The Amazon stared at her.

"But—what?"

For answer, the teenager nodded through the window. The others could not determine at first what she meant. Then suddenly they all became aware of something moving infinitely far ahead among the stars.

"What is it?" Mexone asked, puzzled. "At this distance I'd say it's a large-sized spaceship. No, that there's anything unusual about that. A spaceship could easily be on its way from a distant planet and we've crossed its path."

Viona moved across to the telescope, swung it on its bearings, then focussed it. She gave a whistle of amazement.

"It can't be! It can't be everything!" she exclaimed. "Thania's right. We're definitely on the edge of something new."

"Why? What's wrong?" the Amazon demanded. "There's a mystery here!" Viona looked up excitedly. "Believe it or not, that distant spaceship is the Ultra! In every detail, even the name on the prow. Come and look for yourselves!"

One by one the others did so, only to confirm Viona's statement for themselves.

"Isn't that a coincidence of the Ultra?" the Amazon asked. "Isn't that a coincidence of the Ultra?" the Amazon agreed. "And since we've never been in the Ultra of space before, I don't see how it could happen."

"But evidently it has," Abna said, moving to the control board. "And the sooner we find out what's happened the better."

He shifted the power lever, then glanced back at the others.

"Hang on to yourselves, everybody! The Ultra is going to meet the Ultra—and sooo!"

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